TASMANIAN FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

G.P.O. BOX 68A
HOBART 7001

NATIONAL MUSEUM
12 NOV 1970
OF VICTORIA

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BULLETIN OF THE TASMANIAN FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB
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November, 1970

NEXT MEETING will be held at the Royal Society Room, Tasmanian Museum, on Thursday Nov. 19th. at 7.45 p.m.
SPEAKER: Prof. (Bill) Mollison
SUBJECT: Mammal behaviour - Importance of sex ratios in animals and man.

FIVE MINUTE TALK: Miss. B. Greenstreet.

MEMBERSHIP: Mr. S.B. Greenstreet, 336 Davey St., South Hobart. (Application)

LAST OUTING: Was to Seven Mile Beach, where Dr. J.L. Madden, conducted us through the Research Station, showing various aspects of the work they were doing to control the Sirex Wasp. After this a walk was taken through the Plantation to see the field work.

As a follow up of the September Outing to the Coal River area, a few members went to the same place on 24th. October, and consentrated on the heathy hills. Leucopodon, Tetratheca, creeping Hibbertia, and Parson-in-the-Pulpit orchids, were in abundance.

NEXT OUTING - The Bus Trip to Scott's Peak Road, Mr. L. Sutherland, geologist will accompany us.
Time: Meet at 8.15 as bus leaves at 8.30 sharp. This is necessary so as to make the best use of the day.
Date: Saturday, November 21st. Meet: Prince Theatre
Be prepared for any type of weather (you know our CLIMATE).
There are still a few seats available at $4 each. Get in touch quickly with Miss. F.E. Warren at Tel.23 2033

BIRD OBSERVERS' CLUB Meets on Friday November 27th. at 8 p.m. in the wireless Institute Room at 147 Liverpool St., Visitors Welcome.

November, 1970

RHINCODON, the World's Largest Fish.

The whale shark was first described to science in 1829 but in the 134 years since then fewer than 100 have been scientifically recorded and only a fraction of these in detail. The whale shark is at once the most colourful, the most specialised, and one of the least known of the large sharks.

Length and weight - the average size of a full grown adult seems to be about 30 or 40 feet, but some grow even larger. One measured a little over 45 feet and another caught in a fish trap, almost 60 feet. But the Victorian naturalist, E. Percival Wright, writing of his stay in the Indian Ocean, in the Seychellès, says that many trustworthy men are accustomed to calculating the length of the sperm whale told him of sharks measuring upwards of 70 feet.

Exact weights for the largest specimens are not known, but the American ichthyologist, Dr. Leonard P. Schultz, says that a 70 footer would weigh about 150,000 lb. or seventy tons.

Huge as the whale shark is, it is not the largest fish to have existed. This distinction goes to the shark, Carcharodon megalodon which is believed to have measured up to 100 feet and weighed 125 tons! Fossil Hunters still sometimes find Carcharodon's 6 inch triangular teeth.

Rhincodon's tiny, re-curved teeth are carried in two bands spanning the whole width of the great jaws -- 5 feet across, with a gape wide enough to allow two men to crouch inside. That the greatest living shark has such tiny teeth is the more remarkable because most other large sharks have big triangular teeth so sharp they have actually been used as razors. But the teeth of the whale shark are useless for biting anything; their only function seems to be to hold small organisms when the mouth is nearly closed. And this gives a clue to its food and method of feeding.

All sharks have tough skins which, unlike those of other fish, have a shagreen, or sandpaper-like surface. In addition to the shagreen, the whale shark has an inner protective coat of several inches of rubbery gristle, as rigid and impenetrable as a solid rubber tyre on a heavy lorry.

November, 1970

All told the skin of a 30 foot whale shark is about 4 inches thick,,and that of a 60 footer, 6 inches. No wonder a fisherman who examined a whale shark close up described it as 'hard and unyielding as a brick wall.'

Sharks have no ribs, their muscles being attached directly to the skin which acts as an external skeleton. Like other sharks, the whale shark can, if necessary, increase the strength of its armour. How it does this is not known for certain, but it is probably done by tightening the surface muscles which 'set' the skin in a steel-like mould. Even harpoons bend as if they had struck steel.

Clad in this well-nigh impervious armour, Rhincodon fears not man. Such indifference to man's weapons poses the question whether it was the whale shark and not the whale as is generally supposed, which prompted Job's questions:

"Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook or with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put a hook on his nose? Wilt thou play with him or wilt thou bind him? Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons or his head with fish spears? He esteemeth iron as straw and brass as rotten wood. The arrow cannot make him flee. Darts are counted as stubble.

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As this is the last bulletin for 1970, we would wish you all

A HAPPY CHRISTMAS

We hope that 1971 will bring us all another happy year together.

First meeting next year will be the

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
On Thursday, 18th. February.

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